

Jacinto Benavente on South America

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OUR WORLD

APRIL 1923

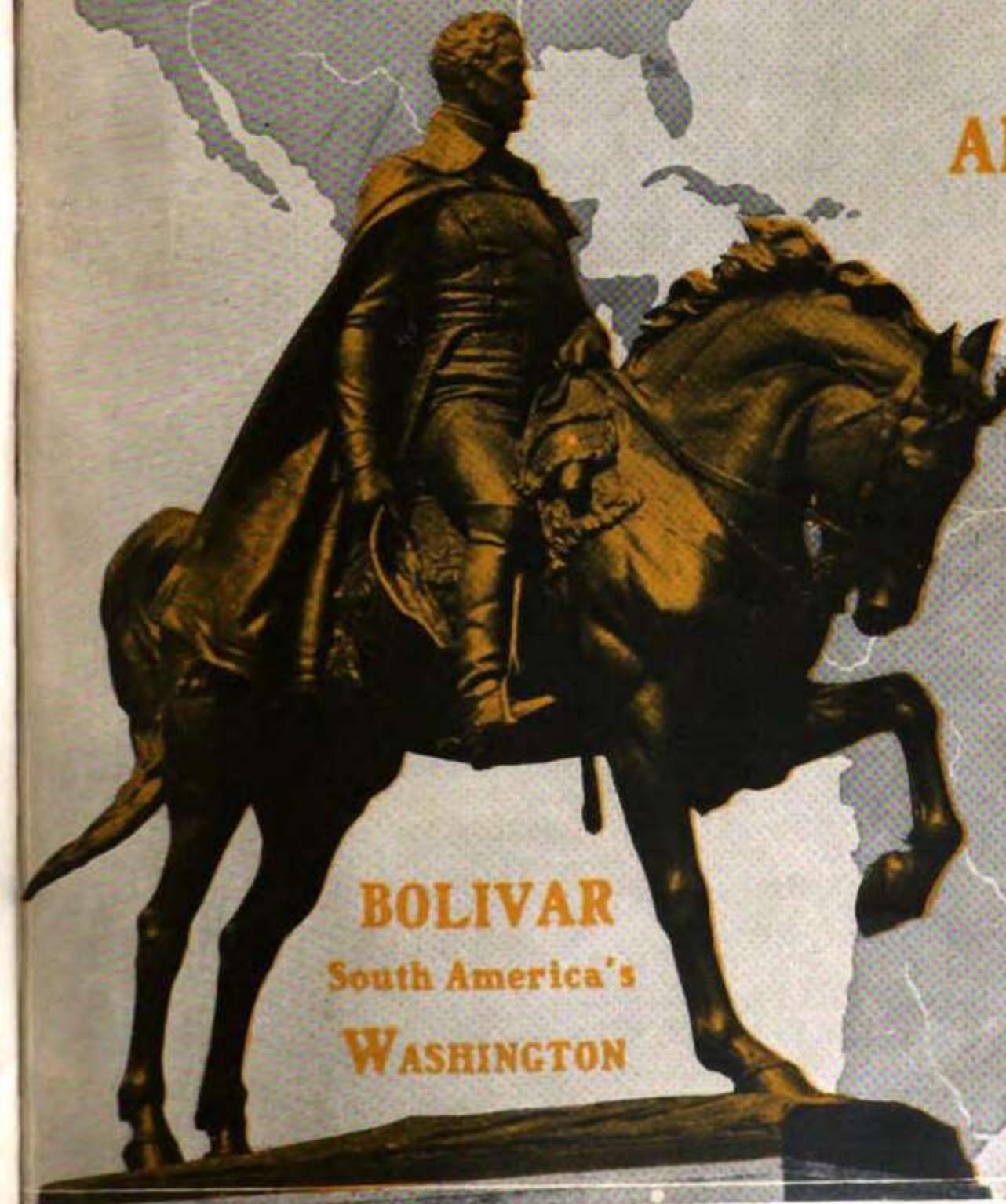
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OUR WORLD

A Magazine of Understanding

APRIL, 1923



Vol. 3, No. 1



MONTEIRO LOBATO

A few years ago Monteiro Lobato, the author of "The Patchwork Quilt," had no intention of becoming a writer. One day he wrote a letter from his plantation near São Paulo to a newspaper of the city, protesting against the prevailing custom of clearing stubble fields by fire. The letter showed such marked literary ability that it was featured on the front page. Since then he has become one of the most important figures in Brazilian literature. He reacted very strongly against the dominant French influence, and has taken his inspiration, his characters and his style from his native country. He is only thirty-eight years old: besides being the author of several novels and collections of short stories, he is the editor of one of Brazil's most important magazines, "Revista do Brasil," and the head of a large publishing house.

The Patchwork Quilt

By MONTEIRO LOBATO

From the Portuguese (Brazil) by Isaac Goldberg

UPA! I swing into the saddle and I'm off.

Nature wakes late these March days. She spends the morning wrapped in a gown of mist, yawning and stretching like an indolent woman, removing then her veils of darkness for her sun bath. The fog blurs the outlines of the landscape, dimming its colors. The whole scene seems filtered through a clouded glass.

Along the hollows I can just see the waving top of the thick grasses, like a selvage edge; a few paces ahead the road is lost, and nothing else is to be seen beyond save, at intervals, the dripping silhouette of some gum tree by the roadside.

Here is a gate.

And now, the Labrego cross-roads.

I turn to the right, heading for José Alvorada's homestead.

This fellow lives hard by the Periquitos, and is admirably located to extend his property as far as their farm—a jewel of a place that clamors through the mouth of its luxuriant grasses for the fructifying seed and the garnering scythe. Harvest here shouldn't be a difficult feat; with fifty hands the product could be made ready for market. Even discounting the damage done by the hogs, and the part eaten by pacas and rats. . . Can that be Alvorada's daughter?

"Good day, my girl. Is your father home?"

She is his only child. From all appearances she can't be more than fourteen. Such glowing health! She makes me think of the maiden-hair ferns of distant Norway. But she's a shy, taciturn sort. See how she's shrunk from me! She has lowered

her eyes and pretends to be busy arranging her head cloth. She has come to this streamlet to get some water, and it's really a wonder she hadn't dashed into hiding behind those bushes at sight of me.

"Is your father home?" I repeated.

She answered with a bashful "Yes," but did not raise her eyes.

How wild this country life does make these timid deer. Moreover, the Alvoradas are not born country folk. The old man, when he bought his present place from the Periquitos, came from the city. I even remember that he used to receive a newspaper every day.

But their life became a terrible struggle against sterile soil and droughts; they might redouble their efforts, yet the harvest kept diminishing from year to year. Visits to the city grew less and less frequent and at last were given up altogether. After the little girl was born to them—an autumnal blossom—and frost ruined the new coffee crop, the man grew surly and never set foot outside his place.

The husband's dejection assumed the form of misanthropy; the wife took root in the place for the rest of her days. She used to say that a countrywoman goes to the city three times: to be baptized, to be married, and to be buried.

With parents thus set in their ways, poor Pingo d'Agua—such was the nickname of Maria Dolores—naturally grew so shy that she was afraid of people. She had visited the city once—when she was twenty days old—to be baptized. And here she was, in her fourteenth year, without ever a

second visit. Read? Write? Nonsense, declared the mother.

Look at her own case. She could read and write like a schoolteacher when she was married, yet since that day she had never had time to open a book. Country life, country wife!

I left the lass behind me, still fussing with her head cloth, and took a short cut through the briars to her home.

What a ruin!

One of the wings of the original house had fallen away, and the rest, in addition to a sagging roof, had one of the walls out of plumb.

The old apple orchard, overrun by ants, had died of neglect; three or four skeletal orange trees, infested by the plague, still shot forth some bristly buds in a desperate eagerness to survive. In addition, there were the castor-oil plants, the wild guayava, the *arasas*, mingling promiscuously with the invading weeds that respected only the tamped earth before the dwelling. An almost abandoned farm, and, within it, aging away, a group of abandoned human souls.

I clapped my palms together. "Anyone home?"

The wife appeared.

"Is *sen* Zé¹ in?"

"He left just a minute ago, but he'll be right back. He went for some honey. Won't you come in?"

I tied my horse to a fencepost and entered. Sinh' Anna looked at the end of her rope. Her face was seamed with wrinkles, and such a complexion! I could hardly recognize her.

"Sickness," she groaned. "I'm near the end. Stomach, liver; and then I have a pain here in my chest that stabs right through to the other side . . . I'm a broken woman, that's what."

"It's half imagination," I tried to console her.

"I know what it is, all right," she answered, sighing.

As we spoke, a well-preserved old lady came in from the kitchen; she was sound to the core, firm, straight, and greeted me with:

"So you're surprised at the way Anna looks? People of today aren't worth a hang. . . . Take at look at me—seventy years behind me, yet I wouldn't trade places with her. I brought up my granddaughter, I still wash, cook, and sew. Yes, sir, I sew!"

"It's easy enough for you to brag, because you never were ill, not even a toothache! But me? It's only a wonder that I'm not in my grave. . . . Here comes Zé."

Alvorada entered. At sight of me his face was wreathed in smiles.

"God bless those who remember the poor! I can't shake hands with you for I'm all sticky. It's only honey. Good stuff, ain't it? It was hard to get at, though. Way up in the hollow of a tree, but I got there just the same. This isn't your ordinary honey; it's wild honey."

He placed his burden of honey upon a stool and went to the window to wash his hands. Then, looking out at the horse:

"So you rode over on the speckled colt today? . . . Fine animal. I've always said that the only decent saddle horses hereabout are this one and the Ize de Lima roan. All the rest are fit for nothing but mill hauling."

At this juncture the girl came in with the water jug on her head. Her father pointed the lump of honey out to her.

"There is the honey we wagered, daughter. I lost and I pay my bet. Business is business. A bet? Ha! ha! Folks here in the country, when they haven't anything else to do, amuse themselves with the first thing that happens along. A flock of magpies flew by. I said that there were more

¹ Popular form for *Senhor José*.



than ten. Pingo said no, there weren't that many. So we bet. There were nine. She won the honey. Country honey, the real stuff. This chit is smarter than she looks, let me tell you!"

Alvorada's garrulousness had not been stemmed by his adversities. All he needed was a little encouragement and he'd prattle away like any city gossip.

I explained the business that had brought me to his place. He frowned and, stroking his chin, reflected for a moment. Then:

"To tell the truth, I'm not worth a thing now. Ever since I had the pest

I feel all broken up inside. I can't afford to hire more help, and it takes more than talk to manage the men in the fields. Do you remember that con-

tract last year? Well, I lost on that. That rascal of a Mina broke one of my axes and stole a scythe. Since that day I don't work for strangers. If I stay in this forsaken place it's only for the girl's sake. Otherwise I'd throw it all aside and go off to the mountains and live like an animal. It's Pingo who still gives me a bit of courage . . ." he wound up tenderly.

The old woman sat down beside the window and opening a sewing basket, settled her spectacles on the end of her nose and began to sew.

I drew near, admiringly.

"To think of your still sewing at seventy!"

She smiled, flattered.

"Yes, indeed. And this is no easy affair. It's a patchwork quilt on which I've been working for fourteen years, ever since Pingo d'Agua was born. In this little box I have been saving patches from every dress that she has ever worn, and when I get a chance, I sew them into the quilt. Just see what a fine present it will make."

And she spread out for my admiration a many-colored cloth, made of large and small squares, all of cotton and each of a different design.

"This quilt is going to be my wedding present. The last patch will come from the wedding dress. Won't it, Pingo?"

Pingo d'Agua made no reply. She was busy in the kitchen, but I caught her peeking at me through the crack of the door.

A few more words, a cup of weak coffee, and then:

"Very well," I said, rising from the three-legged stool. "Seeing that you're in no business mood, I'll have to be patient. Still, I do think you ought to consider the matter. Remember that this year they're paying eighty thousand *reis* per field. There is money in it, don't you think?"

"I know there's money in it, all right; and I also know for whom, too. A broken old fellow like myself hasn't any mind for those things any more. When things were going well with me I took many a one for sixty, and I wasn't sorry, either. But today . . ."

"In that case. . . ."

Two years had gone by before I visited the place again. During this interval Donna Anna had died. The pain that stabbed right through her chest to the other side had proved fatal. The image of those humble rustics was already growing dim in my memory when there came to my ears a rumor that was buzzing about—some-

thing scarcely believable: the son of a nearby farmer, a wild young scamp, had stolen Pingo d'Agua from her people.

"How did that ever happen? Such a bashful little thing?"

"There you have it! You've got to keep an eye on those silly geese. . . . She ran off with him to the city, and it wasn't either for marriage or burial."

The incident upset me a little. I lost sleep nights going over in my mind the scenes of my last visit, and this suggested the notion of going to the place once again. What for? I must confess, out of mere curiosity, to hear what the little old grandmother had to say about the matter. What a blow that must have been to her! I could wager that it had bent her pride and bowed her straight back.

I went.

September was swelling every branch with new sap. A clear, cloudless day. The landscape stood out bright to the very tops of the hills and the distant blue mountains.

I was riding the same speckled colt that I had ridden before. I went through the same gate. I took the same short cut.

At the streamlet, in my mind's eye, I could behold the bashful child, her jug lowered to the stone, pretending to roll up her head cloth. A few paces further and the abandoned farm appeared. The three apple trees of the dead orchard were now withered branches. Only the castor-oil plants flourished, heavily laden with beans. All the rest had sunk into lugubrious decay.

"Anybody home?"

Silence. I repeated my call three times. At last a bent, trembling figure issued from the shadows.

"Good day, *nha*¹ Joaquina. Is *sen* Zé at home?"

The old woman did not recognize

¹ Popular for *senhora*.

me. Zé had gone to the city to see whether he couldn't get rid of this place and move away. As soon as she recognized me, she invited me in, apologizing for her weak eyesight.

I went into the empty parlor.

"Aren't you afraid to stay here all alone?"

"I? I'm all alone wherever I go. . . Everybody has died and left me—my daughter, my grandchild. . . Have a seat," she interjected, indicating the stool on which I had sat two years before.

I felt a lump rise in my throat. I was at a loss for words. At last:

"Life is a funny thing, *nha Joaquina*! It seems as if I were here only yesterday. Despite all your troubles, you people lived happily. And now. . ."

The old woman wiped away a tear with the back of her sleeve.

"To live seventy-two years for such an end as this. . . But death isn't far off, now. I feel it already."

My heart grew oppressed in this solitude where everything had disappeared—the land, the orange trees, the house, these lives. All but the silver-haired little old woman, whose eyes could weep but few tears, so many had she wept. This trembling spectre seemed the soul of the ruined farm.

"What is there left to me now?" she mumbled slowly, in the voice of one who no longer belongs to this world. "Up to the time of the misfortune I had no desire to die. Old and useless as I was, I still enjoyed life. Then my daughter died; but my granddaughter was left; she was twice my daughter,

and all my comfort. And now, what's left? All I ask of the good Lord is that he take me away as soon as He can."

I gazed again about the empty parlor. The sewing basket was still upon the chest, in its accustomed place. My eyes remained fixed upon it.

The old woman guessed my thoughts, and rising, took up the basket with trembling hands.

She opened it. She drew forth the unfinished quilt and looked at it for a long while. Then, in a broken voice, she said:

"Sixteen years! And I couldn't finish the quilt. . . No one can imagine what this rag means to me. Every patch has its own story and reminds me of a different dress of Pingó d'Agua's. On this quilt I can read her life ever since she was born.

"See this patch, here? That comes from her first little undershirt. . .

"How sweet she looked! I can see her yet in my arms, trying to grasp my spectacles with her fat little hands.

"This blue striped piece is from a dress that her godmother gave her for her third birthday. By that time she was running around the house, cutting up all sorts of capers and teasing the cat, who one day scratched her. She used to call me '*óó aquina*'.

"This red goods with the rosebuds goes back to her fifth year. She wore it when she fell on the stones by the brook; that's how she got that scar on her cheek. Did you notice it?

"This checked patch comes from the dress she wore on her seventh birthday; I myself made it. It had a long



waist and she looked so sweet in it—just like a little woman.

"Pingo d'Agua had already learned how to season a dish when she wore this here with the red rings against a white background. I tell you this because she was wearing the dress when she overturned a pot and scalded her hands.

"This red dress goes back to her tenth year, when she took very sick with the measles. The days and nights I spent at her bedside, telling her stories! And how she liked the one about the cat who was so fond of sitting near the fire!"

The aged woman wiped away a tear with the quilt and then sank into silence.

"And how about this one?" I asked, pointing to a yellow patch and trying to revive her spirits.

The grandmother paused sadly for a moment in thought. Then:

"That's a new piece. She was fifteen when she wore it for the first time at a party over at Labrego's. I don't like it. It seems to me that the trouble begins with it. It was a very pretty dress, very tightly fitted. I believe it was the reason for Labreguinho's falling in love with the poor thing. I know all about it now. At that time, however, I had no suspicions. . . ."

"This one," I said, pretending to

remember, "is the one she wore when I was last here."

She smiled.

"You're wrong. Do you want to see which it was? This one with the crimson dots. Take a good look at it."

"You're right, you're right," I lied. "Now I recollect. That's the very one. And this last patch?"

There was a painful pause, then the old woman shook her head and stammered:

"That's the one of the misfortune. It's the last one I made for her. She ran away in it . . . and killed me."

She fell silent, trembling as the tears streamed down her face.

I, too, was unable to speak, oppressed by a burden in my heart.

There we sat, both of us, without stirring, our eyes fixed upon the quilt. At last she broke the silence:

"It was to be my wedding present. The Lord did not wish it. Now it will be my shroud. I've already asked them to bury me in it. . . ."

Carefully she replaced the quilt in the box, wrapping it in a sigh.

A month later she died. I learned that they had not fulfilled her last wish. Who cares about the last request of an old, unhappy country woman? Mere nonsense. . . .